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## “MOLIERE: A BIOGRAPHY.”\*

IN judging a work of scholarship, we should first find out exactly what the author set himself to accomplish, and then consider to what extent he has fulfilled his purpose. Mr. H. C. Chatfield-Taylor, in the preface to his recent biography of Molière, states clearly that his “intention has been to interpret Molière’s life by his plays and his plays by his life.”

A somewhat overeager pursuit of the second of these purposes has detracted to some extent from the value of Mr. Chatfield-Taylor’s work in criticising Molière’s productions. Surely a play planned for immediate presentation on the stage is necessarily the most objective of all works of art. Since the thoughts and emotions expressed in the lines must be those of the characters that speak them rather than of the author that composed them, it is dangerous to consider any speech in a play as an embodiment of the dramatist’s personal opinion. Furthermore, a playwright who is also an actor and a manager is necessarily so occupied with his primary purpose to devise scenes and characters that shall please the public, and with his secondary purpose to fit his actors with parts that shall permit them to exhibit their histrionic aptitudes, that he has little opportunity in his work for the outpouring of personal emotion. And yet Mr. Chatfield-Taylor would have us believe that Molière, in his successive comedies, has laid bare the inner secrets of his life.

Especially in criticising the plays that deal with jealousy and marital misfortune, Mr. Chatfield-Taylor overstrains his attempt to make Molière his own biographer. The dramatist, at the age of forty, married a girl of twenty or thereabouts—the flighty and coquettish Armande Béjart, the younger sister (his enemies said the daughter) of his former mistress and constant companion, Madeleine Béjart. We know that Armande was a faithless wife, and that the thorough understanding of the passion of jealousy which the poet evinces in his plays was derived from personal experience. But we know also that Molière was by nature reticent. He had very few intimate friends; and even to these (unless we accept all of the anecdotes of the garrulous Grimairest) we have reason to believe that he seldom unbosomed him-

\* “Molière: A Biography.” By H. C. Chatfield-Taylor. With an introduction by Thomas Frederick Crane. Illustrations by J. O. B. New York: Duffield & Company.

self. Yet Mr. Chatfield-Taylor maintains that, in several of the plays that Molière acted with his wife, he recited before assembled Paris his own jealous fears and personal heart-pangs. But it is hardly common-sensible to believe that in "*L'Ecole des Maris*" and "*L'Ecole des Femmes*," produced immediately before and immediately after the conclusion of a courtship necessarily delicate, Molière should have exposed to the general public his private views on the subject of young wives. Still less is it possible to accept the suggestion that in "*Le Misanthrope*" Molière has satirized his wife as Célimène and himself as Alceste. Mme. Molière created the rôle of Célimène; and since, at the time, Molière was on bad terms with his wife, it is hard to believe that he could have forced her to appear publicly in a part that made fun of his own relations with her. 'Tis to consider too curiously to consider so. A further pursuance of the same thesis would seem to prove Molière a miser, merely because he wrote and acted the part of Harpagon. If "*Le Misanthrope*" were merely a chapter of autobiography, it would not be acclaimed, as many competent critics acclaim it, the greatest comedy the world has even seen. It is more than that. It is an embodiment of the eternal struggle between individual truth and social lie.

Again, in dealing with the dramatist's attacks upon the doctors of his time, Mr. Chatfield-Taylor strikes the personal note and suggests that Molière's antipathy to the physicians was due partly to their failure to cure him of his own persistent malady. But "*Le Médecin Malgré Lui*" and "*Le Malade Imaginaire*" are much more than ventings of the personal spite of a hypochondriac; they are a phase of the poet's ceaseless warfare in behalf of honesty against imposture.

Mr. Chatfield-Taylor suggestively divides the poet's career into five successive periods, which he denominates Italian, Gallic, time-serving, militant and histrionic. But it is impossible strictly to impose this division upon the chronology of Molière's productions. His tendency was always, after creating a masterpiece in a new genre, to recur to the method of one of his earlier efforts. "*Les Fourberies de Scapin*," produced late in his career, is just as Italian as "*L'Etourdi*" or "*Le Cocu Imaginaire*"; and his very latest plays, "*Les Femmes Savantes*" and "*Le Malade Imaginaire*," are just as militant as "*Le Tartuffe*."

In interpreting Molière's life by his plays, Mr. Chatfield-Taylor is more successful. Somehow his biography gives a very lifelike presentation of Molière the man. The pupil of Scaramouche was something more than *le prince des facétieux, et le facétieu des princes*; he was the type of honest man that Diogenes sought vainly. And it is good to find a book that sets a great man living before the general reader.

It is for the general reader that this biography is intended. It is, therefore, not derogatory to state that to the special student it presents no material that was not already known, nor even a masterful arrangement of the material which earlier scholars had unearthed. If the words "*amateur*" and "*dilettante*" had not been debased by vulgar usage, they might justly be applied to this biography. It is the work of a man in love with his subject and delighted with his labor. And much of this love and this delight are communicated to the reader. The book is beautifully dressed by the publishers, and is picturesquely illustrated by M. Jacques Onfroy de Bréville. Professor Crane, of Cornell University, contributes a graceful introduction. The book is more readable than most biographies; and therefore, in a deep sense, is of value.

CLAYTON HAMILTON.